

Maya Stone Road Links Two City Ruins

Archaeology

By Captain Robert R. Bennett

An ancient stone road or causeway, now swallowed by the jungle, runs 69 miles due magnetic east and west between the two unexplored Maya city ruins, from Coba in the east to end abruptly at Yaxuna. Chichen Itza, the best known Maya ruin, is seven miles northeast of Yaxuna as the crow flies.

Our expedition of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation of New York City, has just returned from the ancient land of the Maya in Mexico. We discovered the destination of this remarkable stone road, or *sacbe* as the Maya call it, which previous investigators reported leaving Coba and running westward into unknown forest growth.

My companion, Crawford Johnson of Washington, and myself, who with half a dozen Indians and necessary pack mules formed the expedition, penetrated the bush where no white explorer had hitherto trodden. We first visited Coba, a known but slightly explored Maya city which Col. Charles Lindbergh and his companions saw from the air last fall during their airplane explorations of the ancient domain of the Maya. Not more than half a dozen white men have previously visited this ancient ruins. Among them were Dr. A. V. Kidder, of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, who with George G. Heye of the Heye Foundation, suggested to me the desirability of exploring the elevated stone highway leading from the city. Dr. T. W. F. Gann, British explorer, Dr. Sylvanus G. Morley and J. Eric Thompson, American archaeologists, and Ernest L. Crandall, American photographer, are other white men who have seen this ruined city. Our objective was not the exploration of the city although we did find that there are four lakes there instead of the two commonly supposed to be in its vicinity.

Only a few years have elapsed since archaeologists challenged the very existence of old stone roads in the Maya area. A search into the literature shows that the stone roads were first mentioned in Stephens' "Travels in Yucatan," published in 1843. This pioneer wrote:

"There is a tradition of a great paved way made of pure white stone called in the Maya language, *Sacbe*, leading from Kabah to Uxmal on which the lords of those places sent

messengers to and fro bearing letters written on the leaves and bark of trees."

He states further, after a brief hearsay description of Coba and a temple there: "From this edifice there is a *calzada* or a paved road of 10 or 12 yards in width running to the westward to a limit that has not been discovered with certainty but some aver that it goes into the direction of Chichen Itza."

Even Dr. Gann, as late as 1926 when he visited Coba, concluded from hearsay evidence obtained from natives that the stone road leaving Coba ran to Chichen Itza.

But Dr. Sylvanus G. Morley, of



Maya stone road in the jungle near Capt. Bennett's camp number seven.

the Carnegie Institution, assures me that no stone road enters Chichen Itza and our exploration showed conclusively that the roads runs from Coba to Yaxuna. Indeed, one is forced to the conclusion that the road we explored was built before the magnificent Chichen Itza was erected. This means that the road is probably nearly two thousand years old.

Conditions in the land of the Maya are much as they were a century or so ago when Maya ruins first at-

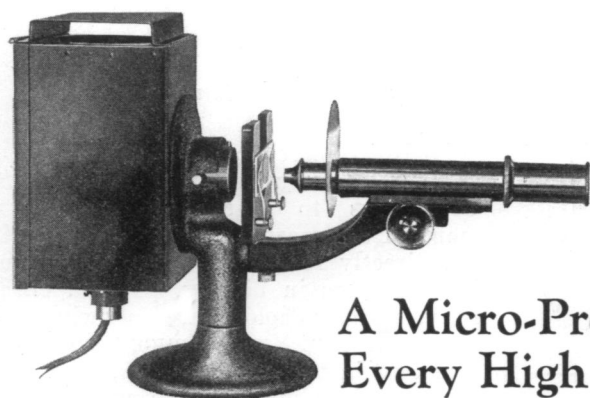
tracted attention, except that mule trains now penetrate the thick forests bringing to civilization the one commercial product of Quintana Roo. This is *chicle*, from which is made America's popular chewing gum. Only a few years have passed since the hostility of the Indian natives, descendants of the old Maya, has turned to friendship.

A lack of water in the jungle region has been a great deterrent to exploration. I was warned by Indians and others that it was dangerous to venture off into the wild regions from Coba and Yaxuna without carrying many kegs and tins of water transported on mule back. Frequently Indians refused to cut their way along the ancient stone road extending into the wilderness. They demanded plentiful supplies of water. Our exploration was made easier by the fact that we discovered four cenotes or deep pools of water in the coral rock, located about 10 miles apart. But for these happy water holes, previously unknown, we would have been greatly inconvenienced.

It is evident that the stone road that we explored was built for ceremonial purposes. It lies straight east and west as though a master engineer had laid it out. Ruins of magnificent temples are strewn along the road. We found one that undoubtedly had never been seen by the eyes of a white man before. Near Coba the road rises sharply and runs directly through one ruined temple, as though for some ceremonial purpose. At the western end, at Yaxuna, the ruins bearing the name of a miserable Indian village of 17 males about a mile and a half away, the road abruptly ends in the midst of unexplored temples and handsome monuments.

As the ancient Maya had no domestic animals, it is believed that their old stone roads were used for foot traffic, ceremonial processions, and as a path for fleet-footed messengers. The rough stone rubble base now so visible and inconvenient for travel, was rendered perfectly smooth and white by a coating of cement long since broken by heavy jungle growth and climatic conditions.

Several strange stelae or stone monuments were found and, while no one has been able to explain their significance, they may be markers placed at various (Turn to page 188)



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Maya Road—Continued

distances along the road. On the side of each of these stelae there is cut into the stone a perpendicular line with two small crosswise lines at top and bottom and a longer crosswise line in the middle. In addition to this strange cross device, there may have been writings on the other side of the stone which climatic conditions have defaced. Should further research show that these stelae do actually mark distance it will be an interesting contribution to our knowledge of the Maya since no indication has previously been obtained that the Maya had a unit of length measure.

The road between the two ruined cities is elevated from the surrounding terrain by retaining walls of heavy stone of various heights, depending upon the irregularity of the ground. The roadbuilders attempted to keep the road level so far as possible. We did not follow every foot of the road, but our party penetrated into the unexplored regions from the two ends of the road sufficiently far to convince us that the road runs directly between the two cities. Some fifteen miles from the Yaxuna end, a branch of the road runs off toward the northwest. The existence of this branch was hitherto unknown.

So well did the ancient Maya build that it would seem feasible not long in the future for modern engineers to improve the ancient road and make it passable for automobile traffic. Then it would be possible to speed from ancient Coba to ancient Yaxuna in a few hours. A week or more of mule-back traveling is now necessary.

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